

The bin Laden videotape: the reactionary politics of terrorism

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The recently released videotape in which Osama bin Laden gloats over the World Trade Center atrocity and avows responsibility for it provides a graphic demonstration of the political bankruptcy of terrorism.

There have been attempts by bin Laden's supporters among the Islamic fundamentalists, particularly in Saudi Arabia, to dispute the validity of the tape and claim it was doctored or entirely concocted by the American government. But there is little doubt as to the tape's authenticity. Nor is this issue decisive in making a political estimation of bin Laden and his methods. The sentiments he expresses match those in other tapes released by his own organization to the Al Jazeera television network, and voiced by bin Laden directly in a face-to-face interview with a Pakistani journalist in Kabul.

On the most recent tape Bin Laden exhibits utter callousness in relation to the suffering of those killed in the September 11 attack. He is indifferent not only to the fate of the innocent victims who died in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, but to the deaths of his own followers, the 19 hijackers, most of them young men from Saudi Arabia. The thousands of office workers slaughtered in New York City and Washington are referred to only as "the enemy," while bin Laden seems to joke about the ignorance of the hijackers, most of whom knew only that they were on a suicide mission, but had no knowledge of the details of the operation when they boarded the airplanes on September 11.

Bin Laden's remarks are a further demonstration that terrorism, far from a viable means of struggle against imperialism, is a hopeless dead end that plays into the hands of the US ruling elite. The Islamic fundamentalist evinces no understanding of the nature of imperialism as a world system or how it can be combated. It is absurd to think that a terrorist attack such as the hijack-bombings of September 11 could intimidate the American ruling elite or compel it to change its policies in the Middle East.

Any conception of the political education and independent mobilization of the working masses is entirely alien to bin Laden and those who share his methods and political outlook. An atrocity like the September 11 attacks has a destructive impact on the development of an understanding among working people of the historical and political background to world events in general, and the responsibility of American and world imperialism for the crises wracking the Middle East and Central Asia, in particular. It sows confusion and disorientation and cuts across the struggle for the international unification of the working class—the only social and political basis for a struggle against imperialism.

The US ruling class has killed millions over the last half century, from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to wars in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf and now Afghanistan. It has organized military coups and death squad dictatorships in dozens of countries. Only the prospect of mutual suicide deterred Washington from launching a nuclear war against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

As far as American imperialism goes, the death of several thousand people in New York City and Washington is a small price to pay for strengthening its grip on the Middle East and Central Asia, the most

important region in the world from the standpoint of oil, a critical natural resource. In the World Trade Center attack, Osama bin Laden has served the purposes of American imperialism as surely as he did while functioning as a CIA collaborator in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Politics and ideology

At one point in the tape, Bin Laden declares that the devastation from the September 11 attacks went beyond his expectations: "Due to my experience in this field, I was thinking that the fire from the gas in the plane would melt the iron structure of the building and collapse the area where the plane hit and all the floors above it only. This is all that we had hoped for."

With his background as an engineer, bin Laden could perhaps envision the mechanical consequences of an airliner filled with jet fuel striking the World Trade Center. But he has not the slightest understanding of the political consequences of this act, or the social and economic forces that underlie the US intervention in the Middle East.

His politics, insofar as the term can even be applied to such primitive ideas, are a combination of demoralization and opportunism. He justifies the September 11 atrocity, which provoked worldwide revulsion and gave the American government a free hand to invade Central Asia, by claiming it resulted in a few new converts to Islam in the Netherlands. He anxiously inquires of a visiting mullah from Saudi Arabia how the action was received in fundamentalist circles there, an indication of how narrowly circumscribed his political universe really is.

There is no mention of the plight of the Palestinians, or of the people of Iraq and other countries now targeted for American attack, let alone of the destruction and loss of life caused by the American bombing of Afghanistan itself.

As for bin Laden's ideology, it is a backward-looking religious outlook that aspires to the restoration of a medieval theocratic regime based on his interpretation of Islam. There are constant references to Allah in the course of his taped conversation, as well as discussion of the significance of his dreams, which bin Laden, in true mystic fashion, interprets as messages from God.

True to form, the American media has seized on the videotape to prosecute the Bush administration's propaganda efforts in support of its war in Afghanistan and its assault on democratic rights at home. But it has said little about the religious obscurantism that pervades the taped conversation.

Bush & Co. repeatedly describe bin Laden as "evil," but they soft-peddle the element of religious fanaticism that underlies his propensity to murderous violence. That might cut too close to home politically, since the Republican right is dominated by forces whose ideology bears a

distinct resemblance to that of bin Laden. Change the “praise Allahs” to “praise the Lord,” and dispose of the beards and turbans, and the videotape could be documenting an underground conference of Christian fundamentalists, hailing the assassination of abortion doctors or the bombing of family planning clinics.

The aims of the Bush administration

Broad masses of people around the world were understandably revolted by the videotape. This, of course, was the aim of the Bush administration in releasing the tape, followed by an orchestrated campaign by the White House and the American media to promote it.

The US government seeks to utilize the popular revulsion to legitimize the American military intervention and beat down any opposition to the use of summary measures against bin Laden, Taliban leader Muhammad Omar, and other Al Qaeda and Taliban figures who may be captured in the coming days.

This campaign is both cynical and hypocritical—cynical, because there is ample evidence that the US had planned military action in Afghanistan well before September 11, and simply utilized the suicide hijackings as a pretext to accelerate its efforts (See “US planned war in Afghanistan long before September 11”); hypocritical, because bin Laden is a former ally of the US government.

The CIA deliberately cultivated and encouraged the Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan for nearly a decade, and a series of American administrations hailed the Mujahedin as “freedom fighters” so long as their activities were directed against the Soviet Union, not the United States. Bin Laden played a major role in this operation, building fortifications and barracks for the guerrillas and recruiting Islamic fundamentalists worldwide for their cause. His Al Qaeda group is in a very real sense a Frankenstein monster created with US funding and weaponry.

Whatever role bin Laden played in the suicide hijackings of September 11, that in no way justifies the American war in Afghanistan, in which the richest and most powerful nation on earth is devastating one of the poorest and weakest. Thousands of Afghan peasants and working people have been killed, people who had nothing to do with the events in New York City and Washington—old men, women and children sleeping in mud huts struck by American warplanes; rank-and-file Taliban soldiers, many of them young boys unwillingly drafted into the military, incinerated in their trenches by saturation bombing; prisoners of war, bombed, strafed, suffocated or otherwise slaughtered after surrendering, in violation of the Geneva Convention.

The media cult of Donald Rumsfeld

In this context, it is worth taking note of the current media campaign to glorify Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, an individual who for callousness and indifference to the slaughter of innocents makes Osama bin Laden look like a rank amateur. Rumsfeld’s news briefings, in which the press and the Pentagon boss regularly exchange jokes over the destruction of lives in Afghanistan, have an eerie resemblance to the videotaped discussions between bin Laden and his supporters.

The defense secretary and various Pentagon generals, echoed by the assembled reporters, routinely employ the language of the Mafia, as they talk about “taking out” Taliban and Al Qaeda forces, using methods

ranging from the 15,000-pound “daisy cutter” bomb to individual assassination by remote control missiles.

The media has renamed these press conferences the “Rummy Show”—affectionately using the defense secretary’s nickname. A recent *Washington Post* report called the defense secretary America’s new “rock star” and said “everyone’s genuflecting before the Pentagon powerhouse.”

The *Post*’s Style section, in a long and flattering profile, explained why the media was so enamored by Rumsfeld. Writer David Montgomery observes that Rumsfeld “is comfortable with the verb ‘to kill.’” Montgomery calls this “a refreshing departure from the old-Pentagon speak of obfuscation and euphemism.”

The writer approvingly describes one press conference: “During this 35-minute briefing Rumsfeld will use ‘kill’ nine times in various tenses and gerunds. The general standing next to him, also answering questions, never says ‘kill.’ He does say, ‘We have degraded their command and control.’”

Rumsfeld has repeatedly declared his preference for the killing, rather than the capture, of Taliban prisoners. He has become the principal moral author of the atrocities that have been committed against prisoners of war in Afghanistan, killings which recall the worst massacres of the Vietnam War, or the butchery of the American Indians in the nineteenth century.

One commentator used the following words to describe the bin Laden tape: “They were overjoyed. They congratulated each other on the destruction.... They were in their arrogance and twisted disregard for human life, revolting.” These same words apply with equal force to a typical Rumsfeld press conference.

Unanswered questions

Another issue raised by the bin Laden tape has been passed over in silence by the American media. The very existence of the tape, and the manner in which bin Laden speaks with his Saudi guest, call into question the Bush administration’s portrayal of Al Qaeda as an impenetrable conspiracy and bin Laden himself as a criminal mastermind.

Why would an evil genius make such a tape, let alone leave it behind in a city about to be occupied by his enemies? Far from being a master of covert warfare, bin Laden appears to lack the rudiments of security awareness—a man who can’t keep a secret and casually blurts out critical information to a guest whom he hardly knows.

A number of questions are suggested by the delivery of the tape to the CIA: Is someone in bin Laden’s entourage working with US intelligence agencies? If so, was there advance warning of the September 11 attacks?

If bin Laden is to be believed, he was informed of the date of the September 11 attacks four days in advance. How could such communications escape US monitoring? These and other anomalies surrounding the September 11 attacks deserve further investigation.



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